SESSION 10

TALK B

SOUND AND UNSOUND APPROACHES IN HANDLING THE FIRM'S INVOLVEMENT IN PUBLIC CONTROVERSIES

Elias Buchwald
Executive Vice President
Burson-Marsteller Associates
866 Third Avenue
New York, N.Y. 10022

ABSTRACT

Consulting Engineers must be able to communicate with the public when their work, their project -- though designed for improvement -- suddenly becomes a public issue. More specifically when they have to deal with news media in a climate of urgency.

Three types of crises are at issue: First, resentment and opposition triggered by the announcement of a project; second, contract renegotiation that reveals considerable added costs of a project; and third, the failure of a structure, resulting in death or serious injury.

To handle these situations in relation to news media, the consulting engineer has three important guidelines:

1. Don't enter the situation with a chip on your shoulder.
2. Remember, news media people are reasonable human beings.
3. Set up a specific procedure for dealing with the crisis.

As consulting engineers become more and more involved in critical situations they should study daily and take appropriate action on these three guidelines. This will better prepare them to meet these crises.

COMMUNICATING IN A CRISIS

I wonder if you have ever considered the paradox that exists in the world of engineering.

Almost every day you create ideas and concepts and structures and products that improve the general condition of society -- that take us all another step forward on the road of progress.

Yet each step forward inevitably is accompanied by new problems, new inconveniences, and sometimes even new dangers.

You design huge jet airports to better serve a mobile society -- but they disturb the peace of the neighborhood and create traffic congestion for miles around.

You design atomic power plants which might provide whole new dimensions to civilized living -- yet hanging over these plants like a smog is the general fear of a horrible catastrophe.

You design 8-lane and 12-lane and 16-lane freeways so we can drive our cars at 80 miles an hour -- and we kill more people with our cars than we do with our wars.

You design new bridges and tunnels and sky scrapers and subways and shopping centers and apartment houses and office buildings, so that the rest of us can live better and work easier and travel more conveniently.

But in order to do this you ask us to uproot our homes, and close our businesses, and put up with a great deal of noise and a great deal of dirt and dust, and turn the other way while our natural landscapes are destroyed, and you ask us to not get excited because our water and air are sometimes a bit more polluted because of all this activity.

This is the paradox of your profession. On the one hand, you attack huge problems and solve them with daring and courage, with competence and a high degree of creativity. But on the other hand you create problems that did not exist previously.

Now I fully recognize that it is easy to say -- and often, indeed, accurate to say -- that the problems created are the price of the accomplishment. If we want one, we must suffer with the other. Personally, I think that that is usually a valid statement, but that's not the point I want to make.

It seems to me that more and more your profession is being called upon to explain, defend and justify these "price tags." It seems to me that, more and more, society is becoming impatient with the side effects of progress. You are well aware that there are many people who don't want industrial expansion -- who don't want more high-speed highways -- who don't want bigger and taller buildings in our already congested urban areas.

And these people are quick to question -- quick to criticize -- quick to demand explanations and justification for the new set of problems that arise while the "old" problem is being resolved.

If I am accurate in this observation, then it becomes clear that there is still a need -- perhaps more of a need than ever before -- for an effective dialogue between your profession and the public. There is a need for the public to become more familiar with your ideals and your objectives and your techniques and your problems.

Now, we could spend some fruitful time discussing this general communications problem and what might be done about it, but it is too involved to go into quickly or superficially. What I would like to do is address myself to one aspect of this communications problem, and that is how you as consulting engineers can best communicate with the public during times of crisis.

'Crisis' Involves A Public Issue

By crisis I mean those times when your work, your project, suddenly becomes a public issue, because, either actually or apparently, something has gone wrong. I refer to the situation in which, quite without warning, quite unexpectedly, you are faced with the necessity of dealing with the press -- newspapers, television, radio -- in a climate of urgency; the situation in which you are asked to answer questions, provide information, or put forth a professional opinion, at a time when you really don't have all the information necessary.

I want to talk on this particular aspect of your communications requirements because I suspect it's probably the aspect that worries you most. If it doesn't, it should.

One wrong statement made during a crisis can undo years of the work you've put into building your reputation for competence and integrity.

What's an example of this kind of crisis? Well, let's take the worst kind of example. A few months ago a bridge across a river in Ohio collapsed, killing a number of people. Let's say that was your bridge.

The first you hear about it might be a phone call in the middle of the night. (Tragedy seldom occurs at a convenient time). The person calling is a reporter from the local newspaper or radio or television station. He's checked the records, and knows it's your bridge. He quickly identifies himself, tells you the bridge has collapsed, and wants to know why. Was it shoddy work? Poor material? Bad design? "We'd like your comment, sir, and we have to have your answers now because we go to press in two hours."

You're in quite a spot. You're only half awake, you're stunned by the enormity of the tragedy, you've been asked questions that you know you should be able to answer, but you can't right then, and you know that anything you say probably will be on the front pages of tomorrow's newspaper and in the morning newscasts over radio and TV.

How do you answer this reporter? What do you tell him? Should you answer him at all? Should you pass the buck and tell him to call someone else? Should you try to get by with that classic; "No Comment"? Or should you simply refuse to answer him at all?

There's a great deal at stake here -- on both sides. The reporter is asking legitimate questions. The press has the duty and responsibility to present as much information to the public as possible on this kind of event. Regardless of the inconvenience to you, he is doing his proper job.

You, on the other hand, have an equal responsibility to supply answers that are adequate and accurate -- and, hopefully, to do so in a way that will properly protect your reputation and that of your client (assuming a client is involved).

Three Types of Crises

Let's see how situations like this can be handled so that the responsibilities of all concerned are fairly met. I can give you some specific suggestions and specific procedures -- but I'll be happy if I do nothing more than get you thinking about the necessity of being prepared to meet these crisis situations.

First, let's take a quick look at the kinds of crises and controversies that might involve you.

In broad terms I see three kinds of crisis situations you might have to deal with. In chronological order, the first might be when you announce the start of a major project. Let's say it's a major urban development program. While you're stressing in your announcement the

grandeur of the project and the significance it has for the community, other people are quick to see the negative aspects of the project. Some people will have to sell their homes, because they're "in the way." Businessmen who have been advertising "Thirty years in the same location" will have to relocate. For those who remain in the area there will be a long period of great inconvenience -- noise, dust, traffic jams, heavy construction equipment rolling up and down streets where children play.

Where you and your clients hoped for and expected public support and enthusiasm, there suddenly is a hard core of critics -- writing letters to the newspapers, creating havoc at city council meetings with their petitions to cancel the project, forming picket lines with baby carriages to keep your trucks out of the neighborhood, and so forth.

If your opponents are numerous enough, or vocal enough, they can easily create an atmosphere in which you are suddenly villains -- the guys who wear the black hats. If this kind of opposition becomes severe enough, the politicians may well decide to act against you -- by stopping the project, or by making you rework your plans in a way that might add considerable cost.

That's one kind of crisis situation.

Another problem arises when, after the project is underway, you find it necessary to renegotiate your contract. Let's say this project is a new school -- a new school in a community that may need the facility, but doesn't have a lot of money to spend on schools.

For any of a dozen good reasons, you find half-way through the project that you have to make major changes in the design. This means a whole new input of work on your part that you hadn't originally bargained for -- additional studies, revised assessments, re-drawn blueprints, and so forth. And when the new materials costs and construction costs are added onto your increased fee, it develops that the new school will suddenly cost a half million dollars more than was originally publicized.

Now comes a barrage of questions. Why were'nt these things thought of in the first place? How could this situation change so dramatically in just a few months? Why weren't these new ideas considered and decided upon the first time around?

All of these questions, of course, imply a certain incompetence on your part. So you've got to respond positively.

You've got to justify your decisions and do it in a way that will make the community willing to spend the extra money.

For many engineers, this represents a crisis situation.

The third type of crisis, and the most dramatic, is the situation I alluded to previously regarding the Ohio bridge collapse. This is the situation in which your project literally fails -- either during construction, or after completion. There may be injuries. There may be deaths. There certainly will be significant monetary losses involved. As I indicated previously, this is the kind of situation in which you're likely to get that telephone call in the middle of the night.

Three General Guidelines

Now, how do we handle these situations. What are the guidelines to follow in dealing with these communications crises.

I think there are three important guidelines, and they can be stated quite simply.

First, don't go into these situations with a chip on your shoulder.

Second, remember that most of the time most of the news media people you will be dealing with are reasonable people.

Third, set up within your organization a specific procedure for dealing with these crisis situations. In other words, be prepared.

Now let me comment briefly on the first two of these guidelines, and at more length on the third.

Perhaps it is presumptious of me to even suggest that you might be "carrying a chip on your shoulder" in some of your dealings with the press. Yet I am sure there are times when that is truly the case, even though you might well disguise your irritation. And no one can blame you for being irritated as the result of constant calls and questions, at odd hours, regarding an event that was completely beyond your control. If there is some kind of trouble with your project, one of the persons most directly effected is you, and it's not easy having outsiders not only overlook that fact but imply that perhaps the trouble is due to bad judgment or even incompetence on your part.

Be that as it may, it's important that the attitude you present to the press be one of cooperation and sincerity. We must recognize that, like it or not, the press has the right to ask searching questions on an issue that effects the public welfare. Let me quickly add that this right does not give press representatives the option of being rude or insulting in their questioning -- and, in fact, few of them really are. When they ask you for information about a project that has been put in the public spotlight, they are doing exactly what they are supposed to be doing. In most instances, the press will not be out to "get you," unless you give them reason to be suspicious because you are being querulous, reticent, or uncooperative about answering their questions. And if, because of a poor attitude on your part you get into a fight with your local media. I'll give you 10 - 1 right now you'll lose.

An attitude on your part that is any less than cooperative can only rebound to your detriment.

'Just the Facts, Please'

When you are in a trying situation, and feel compelled to vent your impatience and frustration, I think it might help to keep in mind that most of the radio and newspaper and television people you might deal with are essentially reasonable people. I don't really think the reporter who calls you at 2 o'clock in the morning to ask why your bridge fell apart

really expects you to provide him with a complete, detailed, authoritative answer on the spot. He knows there has to be a thorough investigation before all the facts can be known.

He calls you because he wants to provide some statement from an authority; and he calls because he might possibly get some hint from you as to where the cause of the trouble lies. And incidentally, if he did not call you and at least give you a chance to make a statement, he would be violating journalism's credo of objectivity.

A good reporters'training and instinct condition him to want to present the facts in a situation, and he's reasonable enough to wait until the facts really are available, if he feels you'll be honest with him.

There's a pragmatic reason for this attitude -- and it would help you to remember it. No newspaper wants to "shoot from the hip" and make wild statements about the cause of a tragedy -- and then have to eat its own words a few days later when an investigation proves something entirely different. The media don't mind having you eat your words, but they don't like to chew on their own.

When you're dealing with the press, if you will start with the assumption that the people you are talking to are sensible, reasonable people whose major concern is simply getting the true facts of the situation, you'll be right most of the time.

Be Prepared

My third guideline is that you be prepared. And you can be prepared if you set up a procedure in your organization for handling the situations we are talking about. Let me give you some specific recommendations as to how to go about doing this.

First, put one man in charge of your relations with the press. Make him your official company spokesman. I say one man because if there are two or three people with this responsibility, very often signals get crossed and confusion results. It's better to have one man who is clearly in charge of all matters dealing with the press. Ideally, the man you select as spokesman should be at a high enough level in the company that he can speak for the company with authority. He should be articulate and poised, and have the ability to maintain his composure under stress.

Second, make sure all your employees, from the janitor on up, know who this man is and know that he is the only one authorized to talk to the press. All your employees should be instructed to immediately refer to this one spokesman all questions they get from the press.

Third, make sure your spokesman knows the projects you have underway, or at least the ones in which trouble is most likely to occur. Obviously it doesn't do much good to have a spokesman who can only say "Gee, I don't know much about that project. It's handled by another department." Your man should be familiar enough with everything that's going on so that he can comment intelligently and authoritatively about it.

Incidentally, it would be a good idea for your spokesman to have with him at all times a list of names and home telephone numbers of the key people engaged in particular project. Refer not only to other people in your firm but to the client people involved and to the other engineers and construction people involved. If questions get down to real specifics, he may well have to call on someone who has more depth knowledge than he has, and he'll want to be able to reach him quickly.

Fourth, establish some ground rules for dealing with the press. For example:

Don't make any statement to the press unless you know it's true. No conjectures. No "as I recall..." No "I think what we did was..." Know your facts before you speak.

Don't be pressured into making quick statements because of the urgency of the moment -- such as at 2 o'clock in the morning while you are still half asleep. In this position, your answer should be something like this: "I just learned about this event. I don't have the facts. I don't know what really happened. Give me a chance to find out and I promise I'll get back to you as quickly as possible."

Don't, in any way, refuse to answer. Simply postpone your answer until you have something concrete to say.

In any statement you make, remember the public interest. The information you supply should be presented in such a way that it is clear that you know and understand the public interest -- and that you are ready and willing to serve this interest.

In your statements, don't use professional jargon. Explain things in terms the man on the street will understand. If you have to use an occasional engineering term, explain it.

On the other hand, don't "talk down" to reporters. Don't think they know absolutely nothing about construction or engineering. Assume they have at least a general understanding of the project involved; if they don't, they'll let you know quickly enough.

Don't try to cover up. In any situation which is in the public spotlight, the truth will out sooner or later. Better it be sooner, and from you, rather than later from a source that can prove or imply that you were dodging the facts the first time around.

When you make a promise to a reporter, keep it. If you tell him you'll call him back when you have more information -- call him back. If you've promised him a personal interview when things have quieted down a bit -- follow through. It is particularly important in these situations to establish with the

press that they can rely upon you -- that they can trust you. Play square with them, and they'll remember it when they write their news stories.

If you have a client involved in the situation, make sure you have some arrangement for clearing things with him. Obviously you don't want to say something for public consumption that could make your client look foolish.

When time and the situation permit, it would be wise to have your statement checked by your own legal counsel. That's just self-protection. Hopefully, you're not saying things that can be thrown right back at you in a law suit. I suggest, though, that you do not let your lawyers set policy in this regard. Too often lawyers tend to be conservative and close-mouthed in tight situations.

I think that these rules, and perhaps one or two others I haven't mentioned, are pretty basic and therefore applicable to just about any situation in which you might become involved. On top of these you will want to add some procedures and rules to fit your particular circumstances -- and experience will dictate what these should be.

As I said before, I think the important thing here is that there be a set, known procedure in your organization which can be followed when trouble arises.

Using Profession Counsel

It has been diplomatically suggested that I mention another approach you can use in meeting these communications crises, and with all due humility, I will be happy to talk about it in the two or three minutes remaining. I refer to utilization of public relations counsel to assist you in these situations.

It is my admittedly prejudiced opinion that public relations counselors can provide a number of valuable services to consulting engineers, as they do for any kind of client. But lest I be criticized for over-doing the commercial, I'll talk only about how a public relations agency might help you deal with the specific kind of problem we're talking about here -- communication in a crisis.

Obviously, the most important thing an agency can do for you in these situations is to provide advice and counsel. You'd have someone to talk to who is knowledgeable about the basic problem involved -- communications. I think this advice would be helpful to you in two basic ways. First, your pr counsel would be intimately familiar with the techniques of communications. He would know how to tell your side of the story in appropriately simple language. He would know the best ways and means to get your story across to the various media you're dealing with. He would know how to write a statement or a news release or a speech that would best present your argument. He would know the technical procedures for dealing with newspaper and radio and television reporters. Finally, in most cases he would

have personal contact with at least some of the media people involved, and could use these contacts to your advantage.

In other words, your pr counsel would bring to the problem special knowledge and experience in the same way that you as consultants bring special knowledge and experience to bear to your clients' problems.

The second advantage of outside counsel is that they can provide an objective view of the situation. No matter how close a professional or personal relationship you might have with your counsel, he still is not as personally involved in the particular dilemma as you are. And being somewhat removed from the immediacy of the situation, he might very well see things more clearly and more dispassionately than you who are intimately concerned.

In addition to being a paragon of cool wisdom, your counselor would also be ready to roll up his sleeves and do some of the hard work involved in dealing with the situation. He would immediately establish contact with the press involved and maintain that contact regularly and frequently during the whole period of crisis. He would help you and your people research the facts of the situation. He would sit at his typewriter and work out -- with you -- the specific message or messages you want to deliver. If an oral announcement or speech is necessary, he would work with you in rehearsing the material so that you can deliver your message

in a proper way. He'd plan the details involved in getting photographs or other visual material that might help dramatize your message.

If the circumstances call for it he would arrange for personal interviews between you and various media representatives. In some cases he might advise a formal press conference -- and would carry out all of the details necessary for this kind of presentation.

In these and other ways he would, in short, take from your shoulders a large part of the responsibility for dealing with the crisis.

The question of whether your communications problems can best be solved with the aid of outside counsel or through your own internal efforts is a question that you certainly must consider -- but it is not the major question.

The major question is whether or not you really need some kind of communications plan for crises in the first place. It may be that you have never before faced the necessity. If that's so, it may be that you have been skillful and competent enough to avoid the problem, or it may be that you have just been plain lucky.

Regardless, I suggest that your past experience may not necessarily be your future experience. It does seem to me that the opportunities for you to become involved in a critical situation are increasing. If they are, you are simply doing the smart thing by being prepared. I don't think it will take much effort or time to establish the procedure and few simple ground-rules I've discussed.

It's an effort that could repay you handsome dividends if or when you become involved in a communications crisis.

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